

## AP New York

### Administration urges revamped passenger car mileage standards

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WASHINGTON -- The Bush administration sought support from Congress Wednesday to revise the method for requiring how far passenger cars can travel on a gallon of fuel, acknowledging that it would not provide short-term relief to high gasoline prices.

Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta told members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee that the administration needed the authority to change the system. He urged new fuel economy rules for passenger cars based on the system recently adopted for pickup trucks and sport utility vehicles.

But Mineta noted that altering the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) program for cars would require 18 months' lead time for manufacturers, which would likely delay any changes until the 2009 or 2010 model years. Even if the Department of Transportation studied the issue for a year, he said it would be "a very, very tight schedule."

"This CAFE issue is not a short-term solution to the prices of gas at the pump," Mineta said.

CAFE requirements for passenger cars have held steady at 27.5 miles per gallon since 1990. The industry currently averages about 29 mpg for passenger cars.

Several Democrats on the panel said the administration already had the ability to upgrade the rules. They urged Mineta to boost gas mileage standards in light of concerns over the nation's reliance upon Middle Eastern oil and gas prices topping \$3 a gallon in some places.

"We need a major increase in fuel economy standards if we're going to decrease our dependence on foreign oil," said Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Calif.

Mineta said the administration would "not accept an arbitrary statutory increase under the current passenger car system."

He said replacing the "one-size-fits-all system" with a size-based system would help improve fuel efficiency, eliminate incentives for automakers to produce smaller and more dangerous vehicles and promote fuel-saving technologies.

The four-hour hearing was packed with officials with environmental watchdog groups, the auto industry and other manufacturers. Any changes would have major consequences for U.S. automakers, including General Motors Corp. and Ford Motor Co., which have announced job cuts and plant closings as they deal with intense foreign competition.

Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., said changing the system was not a simple exercise and worried about "pitfalls and potential for mischief throughout the process of reform. Details and nuances matter greatly."

"These are perilous times for the American automobile industry, the American auto worker and the American consumer," said Dingell, who represents thousands of auto workers.

A top industry official told the committee that it was ready to work with the Bush administration on any changes, but reminded lawmakers that the system for pickups and SUVs was still untested. The light truck program would provide an increase of nearly 2 mpg to a fleetwide average of 24 mpg by 2011.

"It's a complex issue. With the ink barely dry on the light truck reform rule, no one has (had) actual experience with the new system yet," said Fred Webber, president and chief executive of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers. He added it might be "premature to lock in this system for passenger cars at this time."

Alan Reuther, legislative director for the United Auto Workers, raised concerns that changes to the program could lead to outsourcing of jobs related to the production of small cars.

But many lawmakers on the panel wanted Mineta to provide specific fuel savings and miles-per-gallon targets that he would be seeking. Mineta said he couldn't offer those specifics until transportation officials studied the issue, calling such speculation a "ready, fire, aim" approach.

Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., who has pushed for legislation requiring a fleetwide average of 33 mpg by 2015, said giving the administration the flexibility to change the system wouldn't go far enough. He said it would likely produce "tepid results."

"Simply giving authority to the administration is the bare minimum we can do. Are we prepared to tell the American people that we're just doing the bare minimum with gasoline at \$3 a gallon?" Boehlert asked.